

Invisible labour: do we need to re-occupy student engagement policy?

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Abstract

The 'academic orthodoxy' (Brookfield 1986) of student engagement is questioned by Zepke, who suggests it supports 'a neoliberal ideology' (Zepke 2014: 698). In reply, Trowler argues that Zepke fails to explain the mechanisms linking neoliberalism to the concepts and practices of student engagement (Trowler 2015: 336). In this article I respond to the Zepke/Trowler debate, with an analysis of student engagement policies that illuminate the role of discourse as one mechanism linking neoliberal values with practices of student engagement. Through a corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis, I demonstrate a persistent and alarming omission of human academic labour from university policy texts. Instead, the engagements of students and staff are attributed to technology, documents and frameworks. Student engagement is discussed as a commodity to be embedded and marketed back to students, in a way that yields an 'exchange value' (Marx 1867) for universities. The hiding of human labour can be profitable for institutions by avoiding the costs associated with staff recognition, yet it also risks hiding from view the very activities of students and staff that would support key metrics in a Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS 2016). Omitting embodied forms of learning is self-defeating in stifling the very skills needed for innovation in global society. One form of resistance to a contradictory and harmful disappearance of humans from policy about their own learning and teaching engagements, is to re-value the role of the human body in teaching. Therefore, economically, and for the sake of human justice, I suggest that in the spirit of the 'Occupy' movement of 2011, it is time for staff and students to collectively re-write the student engagement discourse and re-occupy our higher education policies.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, embodiment, engagement, , neoliberal, reoccupation, students, Teaching Excellence, Framework

The Zepke and Trowler debate

Zepke draws attention to literature that suggests student engagement is a 'hot topic' and a 'buzz phrase' in higher education (Zepke 2014: 697) because it focuses on those aspects of student success and performativity that can be produced, observed, measured, recorded and reported. Drawing on the work of Thomas (2012), Zepke highlights that a widespread and penetrating interest in student engagement research seems to be closely connected to fashioning generic learners according to a particular vision of student success. In this vision completion, progression and certain work-related outcomes are prioritised and indicators of engagement are based on technical and operational processes (Zepke 2014: 702). Zepke's concern is that 'the very construct of engagement is generic' (Zepke 2014: 701). Measures such as student surveys do not always distinguish between different contexts, learners and teachers and can overlook the diversity of student engagement. Zepke asks whether research on student engagement is now so prominent because it shares the values of the dominant political ideology. Zepke calls for research to go beyond a marketisation of knowledge, performativity and accountability.

Trowler, however, believes Zepke's narrative is based on a very selective approach to, and interpretation of, the literature (Trowler 2015: 337). He suggests Zepke has oversimplified the complex landscape of literature, policy, attitudes and enactments of student engagement, to depict these as 'neoliberal totalitarianism' and a 'cardboard cut-out version of a turbulent environment of discursive and conceptual struggle' (Trowler 2015: 337). Trowler (2015) makes the important point that people are not simply scripted by an ideology but draw on different ideological reservoirs in constructing repertoires of discourse and practices (Trowler 2015: 337).

Trowler (2010) notes that most literature on education could be said to concern student

engagementIt is often implicit in a literature that discusses learning and teaching practices, educational policies, and student and staff relationships. However, there is a danger that a shared meaning becomes assumed:

Many articles, conference papers and chapters on student engagement do not contain explicit definitions of engagement, making the (erroneous) assumption that their understanding is a shared, universal one (Trowler 2010: 17)

Trowler argues that Zepke's thesis both ignores 'contextual forces differentially conditioning different 'takes' on student engagement'(Trowler 2015: 337) and that it 'lacks an explanation of the mechanisms of the relationship between neoliberalism and student engagement because it is developed outside these debates' (Trowler 2015: 336). In the examples to come, it is my intention to offer a form of 'content' by which the suggested 'gap' in Zepke's thesis might be explored and the social world around policy interpretations of student engagement can be theorised, rather than assumed (Trowler 2015: 337).

The value of student engagement

How value is expressed in student engagement policy documents is of particular interest, in relation to Zepke's question of whether student engagement aligns with and supports a 'neoliberal ideology' (Zepke 2014: 697). In such an ideology, the maximisation of the economic freedom of individuals within a free market is emphasised. Some would argue that neoliberal ideology routinely redefines citizens as consumers, rewards merit and punishes whatever might be deemed to be inefficiencies (Monbiot 2016). Yet still these are only ideas. By closely examining policy discourse about student engagement, patterns can emerge to provide an indication of such values and degrees of their repetition. This enables to reflect on how pervasive and entrenched these may be across many elements of communicative behavior.

In previous research I have examined policy statements that draw attention to an additional form of 'value' that the use of *technology enhanced learning* (TEL) is expected to yield (Co-Author 2014; Author, 2015; Co-Author, 2015). These texts often omit any *explicit* reference to the human labour required to realise such value. I set out to discover if similar textual patterns might be noticed in educational policy statements around the term *student engagement*. The example below shows actions that would usually involve human activities being attributed to non-human entities:

Develop more sophisticated structures and KPIs to measure the *contributions* and *impact* of **student engagement** (Student Engagement Policy, Milton Keynes College).

So here, by attributing *contributions* and *impact* to the entity of **student engagement** it is possible to get a sense of where value seems to be placed. Rather than specifically measuring the contributions of people, there is a suggestion that these contributions directly emerge from the concept of **student engagement**. Frequently, the idea that **student engagement** is something universal that institutions might *embed* is discussed in student engagement policies:

The goals of this framework *outline* the aim *to embed* a culture and ethos of **student engagement** (The University of the West of England Student Engagement Framework)

This document *outlines* a strategy to further *embed* a culture and ethos of **student engagement** (Leeds Trinity University Student Engagement Strategy)

Whilst these examples are from two different strategies, written in two different universities, there are some remarkable linguistic similarities. In both excerpts there is a belief that a culture and ethos of student engagement is something that can be embedded. A closer look at how these and other

policy statements are grammatically structured reveals that the human labour required to enact certain proposals appears to be omitted. Above, through a particular structure of nouns and verbs, it is ‘the goals of this framework’ that are attributed with an aim *to embed* a culture and ethos of student engagement, and it is ‘this document’ that *outlines* a strategy. Surely these are tasks that require thinking, planning and a vision and would normally be undertaken by people, not by goals within a framework, or attributed to a document. The verb *to embed* suggests there is work to be done, but there is little indication of who will do it.

Examining student engagement through a corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis

A corpus can be understood as a collection of naturally occurring language, in this case higher education policy texts that are freely available in the public domain. Corpus linguistics (Baker 2006) offers structured ways to search a large bank of text and examine constructions of language. Initially, quantitative findings are generated in the form of word lists and frequencies of words. These can be explored through searches for particular words to reveal common patterns of grammatical structures. These searches do not explain why particular patterns occur, but they do provide significant empirical content to examine and discuss.

The software, *Wordsmith*, supports corpus linguistic analysis through *keywords* (Scott 1997), words that are statistically significant when measured against a comparison corpus, in this case, the British National Corpus (BNC). The British National Corpus was chosen as it contains 100 million words of written and spoken English from a wide range of sources for comparison purposes. A large corpus of words is ‘net-like’ (Hoey 1991) and reveals the values of those producing policy texts, whether they are aware of these or not.

The corpus of UK student engagement policy and strategy texts was gathered during 2016 – 2017 and is relatively small, currently just 62,000 words in total. This is because student engagement policies have only emerged during the last 5 years or so. All of the policies are freely available on the Internet, sourced via searches on ‘student engagement policy’, then downloaded from their respective UK university web sites. In total 20 of these documents, from 20 universities were used to build the corpus. In order to work with these files in *Wordsmith* they were converted into text files and then loaded into the software.

In Table 1 below, the top keywords in the student engagement corpus are shown.

Keyword	Number of instances
Student	1580
Engagement	777
University	514
Framework	74

Table 1: keywords and how often they appeared in the student engagement corpus

A close analysis of the sections of policy statements surrounding these keywords can be undertaken through searches on each keyword. Words immediately to the left or the right of the keyword can then be highlighted, to see the words that come directly before, or after, the keyword. This reveals how an order of words can alter meaning, to place emphasis on textual constructions rather than people, discussed as enacting academic practices. This provides tangible content to consider the difference between how student engagement is imagined at a policy level, in comparison with the contexts in which it is practiced.

Identifying who is 'acting' via transitivity analysis

One way to undertake this form of close scrutiny is via Transitivity analysis (Halliday 1994). This involves labeling the grammatical patterns of verbs to reveal what processes are prioritised and who/what is actually 'doing' these. In practice this requires a researcher to label each of these grammatical components and then to comment on the potential effects of such textual patterns.

A small extract from the findings is shown below as example concordance lines. A concordance line is a line of text taken from a corpus, which includes in the middle, the target word or words that are being studied. This enables the words before or after the target word to be noticed and analysed in terms of structure and meaning. The numbering down the left hand side shows where each concordance line sits in the whole corpus of texts. This makes it easy to return to each example to look at further patterns. The close proximity of the numbering below also indicates that the patterns highlighted in these examples seem to occur with regularity. There are some typical sustained patterns that might be said to contribute to an effacing of human labour. For example, it is 'frameworks', 'agreements' and 'strategies' that are said (through verbal processes) to *define*, *highlight*, *progress* and *enhance* aspects of student engagement.

- 1085 **All of this information** *will help us to report on the impact of student engagement*
1088 **Review and monitor** *the effectiveness of Student Engagement opportunities*
1089 **A framework** *defines and measures the remit and impact of 'student engagement'*
1091 **What 'indicators' should be used** *to measure the impact of student engagement activities*
1097 **The framework** *also identifies a number of features of effective student engagement*
1119 **Goals of this strategy are** *to continue to embed a culture and ethos of student engagement*
1121 **This** *will increase awareness around the impact of student engagement*
1123 **Support our professional services** *in embracing and embedding student engagement*
1125 **what 'indicators' should be used** *to measure the impact of student engagement activities*
1128 **The framework document** *highlights 5 key elements of student engagement*
1131 **The University** *utilises a number of mechanisms to engage students*
1133 **Student Partnership Agreements** *are developing the student experience and student engagement*
1134 **A complementary Education Strategy** *highlights the importance of student engagement*
1139 **This partnership agreement** *is a key aspect in progressing specific aspects of Student Engagement*
1140 **This strategy** *aims to further enhance the continued development of strong student engagement*
1141 **The College** *will provide student engagement opportunities which will ensure equality of access*
1142 **This framework** *aims to support the development of strong student engagement at all levels*

Breaking down these statements to look at their components is a valuable linguistic tool for noticing who the 'actors' are and which 'goals' they are responsible for achieving. The verbs (shown in italics) reveal different types of processes, and the nouns (in bold) tell us who or what is actually 'doing' these. In the examples above, many of the verbs are 'material' in the sense that they make concrete changes in the material world. These are shown in italics: '*to embrace*', '*to embed*', '*to enhance*', '*to measure*', '*to support*', and so on. The nouns enacting these processes are non-human entities, and thus it is implied that many activities connected to student engagement are conducted by faceless documents, institutions and frameworks, rather than by human beings working together.

Material and mental processes that would usually involve humans

In the example statement: **Staff in the Learning Support Centre** *have developed their approaches to Student Engagement*, *developed* is a material process enacted by these staff, who are the actors and *their approaches to Student Engagement* is the goal. Given that people are often the 'doers' of material actions, it is not unreasonable to expect references to people. However, in the corpus examples below, such as (3), it is suggested that **student engagement** itself (rather than students or

staff), has a *focus* that is *to enhance the quality of learning*. Having a *focus* would be categorised as a form of ‘mental’ process and therefore also usually undertaken by a human, whilst *to enhance* is a ‘material’ process. This statement emphasises performativity, but attributes the labour required *to enhance the quality of learning* to a disembodied entity called **student engagement**:

3 The *focus* of **student engagement** is *to enhance the quality of learning*

A few lines lower down in the corpus (10) it is **student engagement** (as a valued endeavour) that *adds to* the quality of university life, rather than the students themselves. The concept that **student engagement** is ‘a sector-wide mandatory imperative’ suggests something compulsory within the concept, with the focus on being a ‘valued endeavour’ coming secondary. There is also emphasis on adding to university life, rather than enriching the lives of individual students, who would in practice, ‘engage’:

10 **Student engagement** is not just a sector-wide mandatory imperative but also a valued endeavour that *adds to the quality of University life*

On a later line of the corpus (29) the focus on benefits to the University, rather than students and staff, continues:

29 Effective **student engagement** *offers a range of benefits to the University*

It is **student engagement**, not people, that *offers* this. An institutional, rather than student focus is clear again (64), when firstly, it is **the College**, not a human, via a ‘mental’ process, that *recognises* the importance and value of embedding **student engagement**. Secondly, priority is given to *embedding student engagement* into operating practices and systems within the institution, rather than relating practices of student engagement with people who might benefit. It is not at all clear how the form of human engagement, that students are expected to enact, are *embedded* into institutional operating practices and systems.

64 **The College** *recognises* the importance and value of *embedding student engagement* into operating practices and systems within the institution

Below in (67) emphasis is placed on the ethos of **student engagement** that *reaches every corner of the university*. In (80) it is **this strategy** that is the actor who *outlines* the aim to continue to *embed* a culture and ethos of **student engagement** throughout the University.

67 It is important to us that the ethos of **student engagement** *reaches every corner of the university*

80 **This strategy** *outlines* the aim to continue *to embed* a culture and ethos of **student engagement** throughout the University

So in each of these examples there is a suggestion firstly, via the word ‘ethos’, that student engagement has a particular character (as opposed to multiple characteristics), and secondly, that an ethos of student engagement should reach across the university. Given the range of sources that were uploaded to the corpus, it is interesting to consider, as repeated ideas occur across documents generated by a range of institutions, how much this might reflect and promulgate a particular set of beliefs. As mentioned earlier, 20 institutional policy documents were gathered in an exhaustive search during 2016 – 2017, providing a snapshot for the purposes of this study. There are likely to be more of these texts available now, as the topic of student engagement continues to be a strong rhetoric throughout the HE sector.

In (81) it is **student engagement**, rather than human beings that make a difference as measured, in terms of impact, and outcomes

81 Outcome measures are measures of the wider impact of **student engagement** *to identify how it is making a difference*

It seems that in (84) **student engagement** can also be packaged, marketed and communicated to applicants, current students and staff. I would question how exactly a form of human engagement (that students are expected to enact) is ‘packaged’ and then marketed and communicated back to the students who engage?

84 *Packaging, marketing and communicating* **student engagement** to applicants, current students and staff.

According to neoliberal ideology, knowledge is a commodity and higher education is a market where knowledge and skills are traded (Zepke 2014: 702). Universities offer marketable knowledge and skills, as well as supplying marketable services (Codd 2005), so perhaps the idea that student engagement can be packaged, marketed and communicated is not so strange after all. Yet such ‘trafficking in human attributes’ (Kopytoff 1986: 85) undermines the broader purposes of universities’.

In the next two examples, it is the College once again (141) that has been successful *in developing* its approaches to **student engagement** and a brand and strapline can take credit for promoting **student engagement** (158).

141 **The College** has been successful *in developing* its approaches to **Student Engagement**

158 *Developing* a strong and overarching brand and strapline *to promote* **student engagement**

In both (185) and (193) it is **student engagement** that is said to have impact rather than the activities of students and staff:

185 All of this information will help us to report on the *impact of* **student engagement**

193 This will increase awareness around the *impact of* **student engagement** and will ensure that our quality enhancement work is better informed.

Finally, in (216), it is the phrase **student engagement**, and neither staff nor students, that is attributed by the Student Union and the University with enhancing the quality of learning and teaching and more broadly the student experience:

216 ‘The Student Union and the University acknowledge and welcome the essential role that **student engagement** *plays in enhancing the quality of learning and teaching and more broadly the student experience*’

A careful examination of statements about student engagement also reveals many instances where student engagement, a strategy, or an institution undertakes a ‘mental’ or ‘verbal’ process that would normally belong to a human. In (131) it is student engagement survey data that has *presented* the ‘opportunities’ mentioned. In (133) it is an student engagement framework that *represents our approach to engagement by, with and for students*. Furthermore, in (224) it is a framework that

defines and measures both the remit and impact of student engagement and in (442) it is the higher education strategy, not lecturers or managers, that defines its commitment to the development of independent learners and student engagement:

131 **Student engagement survey data** *has presented opportunities for enhancement of teaching and learning*

133 **The student engagement framework** *represents our approach to engagement by, with and for students*

224 **The framework** *defines and measures the remit and impact of student engagement*

442 **The Higher Education Strategy** *defines its commitment to the development of independent learners and student engagement*

In the examples above, human activities are represented by **survey data, frameworks and strategy**. In (464) and (467) below, human voices that would *articulate* and *outline* the topics stated are enacted instead by **the student engagement policy**:

464 **The Student Engagement Policy** *articulates the mechanisms by which the university facilitates, supports and monitors student engagement*

467 **The Student Engagement Policy** *outlines the range of student feedback opportunities*

These examples highlight a strong tendency in these policy documents to attribute human activities to things and statements, rather than to people. They place a distinct emphasis on benefits to the institution from student engagement. They also consistently give credit to the university, the college, the framework or policy, rather than to students or staff, for the success and promotion of student engagement.

The textual patterns in these examples from university policy documents support claims made by Zepke: that there is ‘an approach to knowledge that makes it largely invisible in the engagement discourse, a view of learning that emphasises outcomes and performance, and a view of quality that is informed by accountability measures’ (Zepke 2014: 702),

Student labour, staff engagement and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

What emerges from the examples above is a focus on student engagement as an entity that is linguistically detached from the people with whom it would naturally be connected. It is discussed as something that can be packaged, marketed and promoted. Strategies are also provided with powers to outline and articulate plans and to represent people, but in a manner that is universal, rather than contextual and inclusive of diversity. In previous writing (Co-Author, 2014) I have drawn on Marxist theory in relation to technology, which like any commodity has ‘value’ that also represents a quantity of human labour. Marx distinguished between ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’ (Marx 1867). ‘Use value’ relates to the human social necessities a technology might fulfil in conjunction with a person’s labour. On the other hand, ‘exchange value’ takes the human labour involved for granted to realise a profit in an economic market. In the same way that new technologies can quickly become subordinated to narratives of exchange value, it would seem that the human labour of student engagement is subject to similar fluid expression within policy language. In relation to students, many of the examples above seem to be about promoting the phenomenon of student engagement as a form of exchange value for the institution. In relation to staff activities, student engagement is said to have powers to enhance quality, learning and teaching and university processes, but little is said about the many hours of human labour that connects these areas of work.

The labour of academic staff in engaging students also appears to be unaccounted for. In addition to

teaching and research, academics undertake a range of activities such as personal tutoring, writing references for students seeking employment, sitting on programme review committees and acting as external examiners that can be described as 'academic citizenship' (Havergal 2015). While important to maintain quality and support pastoral care that universities now commodify and sell to students this labour is undervalued by institutions and does not bring career rewards.

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a new ranking system for universities in England... Measurement of teaching quality, the learning environment and student outcomes need to be evidenced through data in institutional TEF responses and some of this data relates to contact time between teachers and students. In examples below, taken from the recently published *Teaching Excellence Framework: Year 2 Specification* (BIS 2016), the office hours that lecturers regularly provide for their students, physically or via Skype, are hidden within statements that objectify situated, social encounters as '*optimum levels of contact time*' and '*appropriate levels of contact time*'. It is someone's notion of 'optimum' or 'appropriate' quantities of time that then 'acts' to secure, high levels of engagement and commitment to learning and study from students. There is no mention of the lecturers or other professional colleagues who will personalise provision and provide this time, or indeed of the labour provided by students in using this time; or of the interactions that occur:

Optimum levels of contact time, including outstanding personalised provision secures the highest levels of engagement and active commitment to learning and study from students (p.46)

Appropriate levels of contact time, including personalised provision secures high levels of engagement and commitment to learning and study from students. (p.47)

Instead, a transaction (underpinned by a series of assumptions) takes place between objectified time and high levels of engagement and commitment from students. It is *levels of contact time* that secures engagement from students and not the staff working to commit that time. There is no mention of who decides the levels of contact time that are 'optimum' or 'appropriate'. More importantly still, is the problematic positioning of students in each of these texts, which exposes contradictions. Students are not discussed as a willing partner in their own learning, nor even as a consumer, but as a form of contractor from whom commitment must be 'secured'. Work undertaken in student-staff partnerships through agencies such as the Joint Information Systems Committee (Jisc), the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) offer alternatives to transactional relationships between teaching staff and students in the form of mutual and collaborative forms of engagement. However, I suggest a more radical reconsideration of how university and government policy could be rewritten. The shared and intimate practices of engagement between students and staff should not be hidden, but instead be celebrated. Moreover, a more honest approach needs to acknowledge that these crucial relationships take time and human labour to develop.

Learning and the human body

Trowler's challenge is that Zepke's analysis misses out 'content'. He adds that 'the nature of the relationship between ideologies and the social world is simply assumed not theorised' (Trowler 2015: 337). This criticism calls for a renewed focus on embracing the role of our human bodies in learning and related policy. Academic work within a neoliberal context is strongly constructed (even constricted) around 'managing time in a demonstrably efficient manner' (Walker 2009: 284). In seeking to justify and 'outsmart' time, there is a tendency to marginalise the role of human bodies in practices of teaching and learning, treating the body 'as relevant only as a vessel that houses the brain' (Ng 2008: 1). Policy language provides a lens through which to observe the tendency not to credit humans with their own physical and mental labour and to instead discuss processes and systems. This often illogical and contradictory way of writing appears to be widely accepted by institutions and government bodies. One reason for this may be that people have little

time to notice, or that noticing these changes is simply not a priority. More generally, Shahjahan (2015) suggests that people now just 'set aside' time to focus on the immediate needs of our bodies: to eat, to work out, to sleep. Thus bodies become 'things' to be serviced toward the ends of production and efficiency (Shahjahan 2015: 7). In order to undo such a colonisation of our physical being 'we should strive to "embody" ourselves: inhabit our bodies fully, acknowledge an interconnection between mind, body, and spirit, and contest the insertion of the body into the market' (Shahjahan 2015: 7).

In the policy extracts discussed earlier, student engagement was expressed as something the university *embeds*, *packages* and *markets* to students. However, when learning is exciting and potentially transformative students and lecturers may feel an intensely personal flow of engagement through their bodies as well as their minds. Rowe argues that this powerful sense of connection with the subject matter and the other people in the classroom promotes a passion for learning that can be described as erotic and which can build group resistance to the competitive and divisive forces at the heart of neoliberal education that heavily invest in isolated individuals (Rowe 2012: 1034).

The textual examples I have drawn from policy documents, that omit direct references to the labour and emotions of people, would seem to be just a part of a much larger hegemonic knowledge system in modern society. Rather than simply emphasising what staff and students need to do in terms of performativity and accountability alone, these texts seem to also omit the very presence and spirit of students and teachers.

Vostal, Silvaggi and Vassilaki (2011) identify a 'one-dimensional' transformation of higher education that 'seeks to meet the imperatives of a capitalist ethos' (Vostal, Silvaggi and Vassilaki 2011: 17). One form of resistance to this is to embrace the role of the multi-dimensional human body in teaching. This helps to replace 'missing content' in a different way. It restores the dimensions of intimacy, self-disclosure, vulnerability and excitement in learning. In policy documents, the placing of the words around student engagement has direct implications for meaning. Certain messages can be repeatedly broadcast that obscure *whose* academic labour is involved with the effect of marginalising human physical, mental and emotional ways of being. Therefore, 'one-dimensional' policy texts that promote mainly economically-linked successes of student engagement may appear to serve a global labour market, but they alienate the outcomes of teaching from the human bodies that produce them. Ultimately, 'missing out' this human content, as more embodied forms of learning, may well be self-defeating in reducing, rather than increasing, innovation. This prompts my final question. In the spirit of the 'Occupy' movement of 2011, when people who were 'fed up with Wall Street writing the rules' (Merle 2016) sought to take over physical spaces, is it now time for both staff and students to protest and collectively re-write the student engagement discourse - to re-occupy our higher education policies?

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